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Prussia and France 1862–71

POINTS TO CONSIDER

In 1870 Emperor Napoleon III declared war on Prussia. The Franco-Prussian War was to have huge results for Prussia, Germany, France and Europe. According to British statesman Benjamin Disraeli, it was 'a greater political event than the French Revolution of last century ...'. The balance of power has been entirely destroyed'. Who or what was responsible for the war? Why did the Prussians win? These questions will be addressed by examining the following issues:

- Franco-Prussian relations 1866–70
- The road to war
- The Franco-Prussian War 1870–1
- The results of the war

The chapter will conclude by considering Bismarck's role in creating a united Germany.

Key dates

1867		The Luxemburg crisis
1868–70		The Hohenzollern candidature crisis
1870	July	The Ems telegram Start of Franco-Prussian War
	September	Napoleon III surrendered at Sedan
	October	Surrender of the French army at Metz
1871	January	German Second Empire proclaimed at Versailles
		France accepted an armistice
	May	Treaty of Frankfurt

1 | Franco-Prussian Relations 1866–70

The international situation in 1866 was far better than Bismarck might have expected:

- Britain generally welcomed Prussia's dominant position in central Europe, regarding it as a welcome counter-weight to both France and Russia.

Key question

What had been the state of relations between Bismarck and Napoleon pre-1866?

- Russia was pleased that it had a reliable partner against Austria.
- Austria, absorbed with the problem of dealing with its various subject nationalities, especially the Hungarians, was not in a position to mount a war of revenge.

The only real threat was France, unpredictably led by Emperor Napoleon III. Bismarck knew that Napoleon was likely to oppose the establishment of a powerful German state that would dominate Europe east of the Rhine and pose a threat to French security.

Napoleon III

The motives behind Napoleon III's foreign policy are difficult to determine. He seems to have wanted simply to restore France to a position of influence in Europe, through peaceful means if possible. But the difficulty he had in making a decision and sticking to it made him appear inconsistent and unpredictable. Unlike his uncle, Napoleon I, he lacked the ruthlessness and the will to carry things through to their logical conclusion. This put him at a marked disadvantage when dealing with a man as devious and determined as Bismarck, who was likely to outplay him at his own game.

Relations between Bismarck and Napoleon III pre-1866

Bismarck and Napoleon had first met in Paris in 1855. The meeting was a successful one on a personal level, and the two men parted on friendly terms. They met again at Biarritz in October 1865 (see page 66). Historians have speculated ever since on what passed between them. Perhaps Bismarck made a deal with Napoleon by agreeing on territorial or other rewards for French neutrality in the event of an Austrian-Prussian war. More likely he suggested that an opportunity might arise for French expansion, perhaps in the Rhineland, after a Prussian victory over Austria. Almost certainly there was no commitment on either side, but there probably were protestations of good will and general support.

The situation in 1866

Napoleon III remained neutral in the Austrian-Prussian War. He had hoped to turn his neutrality to good advantage by mediating between the combatants and by threatening to join in the war to persuade them to make peace on his terms, which would include territorial gains for France. The speed and scale of Prussia's victory (see pages 69–71) dashed Napoleon's hopes. When he attempted to mediate after the Battle of Sadowa, the offer was declined by Bismarck, who instead sent the Prussian ambassador in Paris to inform Napoleon that Prussian expansion would be limited to north Germany, and that the south German states would remain independent. The division of Germany was presented to Napoleon as a reward for his neutrality during the war. Bismarck realised that Napoleon would regard a united

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Germany as a potential threat to France and feared that the Emperor might march to Austria's assistance.

The threat of German unity

After 1866 Napoleon was concerned by the situation in Germany. Prussia now controlled more than two-thirds of Germany and it was unrealistic to suppose that the remaining third could or

Profile: Louis Napoleon 1808–73

- | | | |
|------------|-----------|---|
| 1808 | | – Born, son of Louis Bonaparte, King of Holland and brother of Emperor Napoleon Bonaparte |
| After 1815 | | – Lived in south Germany and Switzerland: he developed a deep sense of destiny, believing that he would restore his family's fortunes |
| 1836 | | – His attempt to provoke a rebellion in support of the Bonapartist cause in Strasbourg ended in farce: he was arrested and forced into exile (in the USA, Switzerland and Britain) |
| 1840 | | – A second attempt to raise a rebellion at Boulogne was unsuccessful: he was sentenced to life imprisonment |
| 1846 | | – Escaped from prison and fled to Britain |
| 1848 | | – Elected President of the new French Republic, following the overthrow of King Louis Philippe |
| 1852 | | – Became Emperor Napoleon III |
| 1859 | | – Defeated Austria in northern Italy |
| 1870 | July | – Led France into the Franco-Prussian War |
| | September | – Forced to surrender at Sedan |
| 1873 | | – Died in exile in England |



Bonapartist

Supportive of the Bonaparte family. Although Napoleon Bonaparte had been defeated in 1815, many French people regarded his rule with great nostalgia. They hoped that a member of his family might again rule France.

Key term

Many of those who have written about Napoleon III have been less than flattering. He can be seen as promising much but achieving little. He can be criticised for replacing a democratic republic with an authoritarian regime. Some see the disastrous Franco-Prussian War as the fitting finale to a corrupt, incompetent regime.

But Napoleon III has his admirers. Arguably the catastrophe of 1870–1 obscured many of his achievements. He can be seen as a far-sighted and pragmatic leader, keen to reconcile the desire for liberty and democracy with the principle of order. As a champion of the principle of nationality he had a significant impact on the re-shaping of mid-nineteenth century Europe. It was somewhat ironic that the forces of German nationalism destroyed him in 1870.

would continue an independent existence indefinitely. After the Treaty of Prague Bismarck extended the *Zollverein* to include the four south German states and involved them in the new *Zollparlament* (see page 76). Although it was nominally concerned only with economic affairs, it seemed that the *Zollparlament* would be a further step towards full German unity.

The south German states

The four south German states did not present a united front, for they distrusted each other as much as they distrusted Bismarck. In addition, they distrusted Napoleon – with good reason. They believed – correctly – that he had had designs on part of their territory as his reward for French neutrality during the Seven Weeks' War. In July 1866 the French ambassador in Berlin had presented detailed plans to Bismarck for France to acquire part of the Rhineland belonging to Bavaria and Hesse. This idea was firmly rejected by Bismarck, who did not want to give away any German territory to France. But nor, in mid-1866, did he want to alienate Napoleon. He therefore suggested that France should look for expansion, not in the Rhineland, but further north in the French-speaking areas of Belgium and Luxembourg.

Key question
Why did Franco-Prussian relations deteriorate after 1866?

The Luxemburg crisis

Having missed the chance to check Prussia's growth of power in 1866, Napoleon needed a diplomatic and territorial success to prove that France remained Europe's greatest power. Luxemburg seemed to provide an opportunity for Napoleon.

Bismarck's policy on the Luxemburg question is difficult to unravel. He began by helping Napoleon to 'persuade' the King of the Netherlands, who was also Duke of Luxemburg, to relinquish the Duchy. The King, short of money and with no real interest in Luxemburg, readily agreed. However, Prussia also had certain rights in Luxemburg, in particular to garrison the fortress. This right dated from the Vienna Settlement of 1815, which had made the fortress part of the German Confederation.

By the end of 1866 Bismarck was feeling much less need to be friendly towards Napoleon, who was stirring up demonstrations in Luxemburg against 'the hated domination of Prussia'. Partly in response to this and partly to encourage nationalist sentiment, Bismarck now began to refer to Luxemburg as German, and announced that its surrender to France would be 'a humiliating injury to German national feelings'. He declared: 'If a nation feels its honour has been violated, it has in fact been violated and appropriate action must ensue ... We must in my opinion risk war rather than yield.' Anti-French sentiment increased throughout Germany.

Why did Bismarck encourage this nationalist hysteria? It seems unlikely that he wished to start a war with France at this stage. The Prussian army needed time to recover from the Austrian War and the North German Confederation was still fragile. Perhaps his intention was to start a campaign of provocation to drive

Key date

The Luxemburg crisis:
1867

Napoleon into war in due course. Perhaps, rather than leading, he was himself partly led by German nationalists who he knew he could not afford to alienate.

Napoleon v Bismarck

In March 1867 Bismarck released texts of the secret military alliances he had made with the south German states. These showed that the North German Confederation and the four southern states were not as independent of each other as had been assumed.

Napoleon and Bismarck now met head on in a series of diplomatic battles. Napoleon began new negotiations with the King of the Netherlands, playing on the King's fears that Prussia was after a slice of Dutch territory, and offering to protect the Netherlands in return for Luxembourg. From Napoleon's point of view the King wrecked the scheme by agreeing to sell Luxembourg for 5 million guilders, subject to approval by the King of Prussia. This, he must have known, was not likely to be given. Indeed, Bismarck used the patriotic German fervour he had encouraged as an excuse to threaten the King of the Netherlands not to give up Luxembourg.

Bismarck now appealed to the Great Powers to settle the Luxembourg question. At a conference in London it was agreed that:

- the Prussian garrison should be withdrawn
- Luxembourg's independence and neutrality would be guaranteed by the Great Powers.

While the outcome of the London conference seemed like a compromise, the fact that there was no territorial gain for France was a heavy blow for Napoleon.

The results of the Luxembourg crisis

The Luxembourg crisis seriously damaged Franco-German relations. Nevertheless, the years 1867–70 were peaceful. Bismarck was still keen to avert war. Fearful of French military strength, he was also concerned that Napoleon might find allies. Austrian Emperor Franz Joseph, hankering after regaining influence in Germany, twice met Napoleon in 1867 to see whether it was possible to reach agreement. Fortunately for Bismarck, these efforts came to nothing. There was no real basis for agreement. Franz Joseph was aware that most German Austrians totally opposed a pro-French and anti-Prussian policy.

The Luxembourg crisis has been seen as the point at which Bismarck stopped being a Prussian patriot and became a German one. However, there is no evidence that Bismarck himself thought this. He stirred up and used German national feelings quite cynically as a means to increase Prussian influence over the rest of the German states, as well as a weapon against France. He now wanted a united Germany (under Prussian control) but knew that this was unlikely to happen overnight. Only a war with France,

which raised national consciousness and brought all Germans together, was likely to speed up the process.

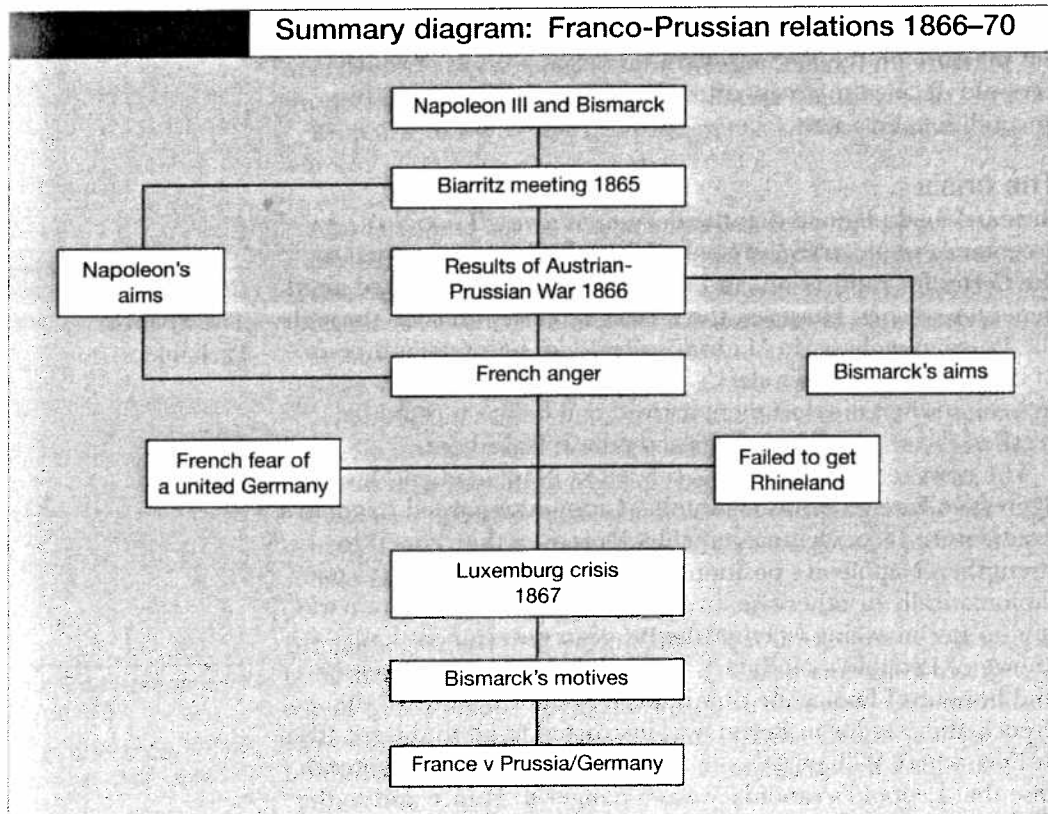
Bismarck's peaceful intentions?

In a long interview which Bismarck gave to a British journalist in September 1867 he spoke of his wish for peace:

There is nothing in our attitude to annoy or alarm France ... there is nothing to prevent the maintenance of peace for 10 or 15 years, by which time the French will have become accustomed to German unity, and will consequently have ceased to care about it.

In this interview Bismarck presented himself as a man of peace. He wanted to allay British fears about Prussian warlike intentions and to reduce the chance of a British alliance with France. He made use of such methods to present himself and his policies in a favourable light. He understood very well the value of a good public relations system. This makes it difficult to judge his true intentions from his public utterances. He did not always believe what he said, or say what he believed.

Summary diagram: Franco-Prussian relations 1866–70



2 | The Road to War

The Hohenzollern candidature

In 1868 the Queen of Spain, Isabella, was driven out of the country by a revolution. The Spanish government made efforts to find a new monarch among the royal houses of Europe. In February 1870 an official offer was made to Prince Leopold of Hohenzollern by the Spanish government. Leopold's father referred the request to William I, who as King of Prussia, was head of the Hohenzollern family. William left to himself would have refused consent. He knew that to proceed would provoke French hostility, for Napoleon would see it as a threat to 'encircle' France, with Hohenzollern monarchs in Berlin and Madrid pursuing anti-French policies simultaneously.

William was persuaded to change his mind by Bismarck, who sent him a strongly worded memorandum: 'It is in Germany's political interest that the house of Hohenzollern should gain in esteem and an exalted position in the world'. In the end the King gave his consent, provided that Leopold himself wished to accept the throne. As Leopold did not want to do so, the affair appeared to be at an end.

However, Bismarck had secretly sent envoys to Spain, with large sums of money as bribes, to push Leopold's candidacy. He also put pressure on the Hohenzollern family, as a result of which Leopold decided to accept after all. In June William gave his unconditional consent.

The crisis

Bismarck had planned that the document giving Leopold's acceptance would arrive in Spain, be immediately presented to the *Cortes* for ratification, and then the news be announced amid general rejoicing. However, the message, relayed in code through the Prussian embassy in Madrid, suffered an unforeseen mix-up of dates due to a cipher clerk's error. As a result the *Cortes* was not in session when the document arrived and before it could be recalled the secret of Leopold's acceptance leaked out.

The news reached Paris on 3 July 1870. Napoleon and his new aggressive Foreign Minister Antoine Gramont regarded Leopold's candidature as totally unacceptable. Moreover, they hoped to strengthen Napoleon's position at home by a resounding victory, diplomatically or otherwise, over Prussia. An angry telegram was sent to Berlin asking whether the Prussian government had known of Leopold's candidacy and declaring that 'the interests and honour of France are now in peril'. Count Benedetti, the French ambassador in Berlin, was instructed to go to the spa town at Ems, where William I was taking the waters, to put the French case that Leopold's candidacy was a danger to France and to the European balance of power, and to advise William to stop Leopold leaving for Spain if he wanted to avoid war.

William, who had no wish for war, assured the ambassador of Prussia's friendship for France, and on 12 July Leopold's father withdrew his son's candidacy. The affair appeared to have been

Key question

Who was most to blame for the Franco-Prussian War?

The Hohenzollern candidature crisis: 1868–70

Key date

Cortes

The Spanish Parliament.

Key term

settled, with the diplomatic honours going to France. Bismarck, in Berlin, spoke of humiliation, and threatened resignation. He was saved from having to make good his threat by Napoleon.

Goaded by Gramont, the French Emperor now overplayed his hand. Leopold's renunciation had been announced in a telegram from his father to the Spanish government. Now France demanded an official renunciation from William I, on behalf of Leopold, for all time, and the French ambassador was ordered to see the King again and obtain his personal assurance. They met on 13 July. William found this deeply insulting and refused to give the assurances demanded since he had already given his word. Even so, his reply was conciliatory. As a matter of course he instructed one of his aides to notify Bismarck, in Berlin, of the day's events in a telegram. He also gave Bismarck permission to communicate details to the press.

Key question

To what extent did the Ems telegram cause war?

The Ems telegram

That evening, in Berlin, Bismarck, dining with Generals Moltke and Roon, received the telegram from Ems. Having read it, Bismarck, 'in the presence of my two guests, reduced the telegram by striking out words, but without adding or altering anything'. The shortening of the text had the effect of making the King's message to the French ambassador appear to be an uncompromising response to the French demand to renounce support for the Hohenzollern candidature for all time.

Bismarck in his *Memoirs*, written in the 1890s, described his actions:

After I had read out the concentrated version to my two guests, Moltke remarked. 'Now it has a different ring, in its original form it sounded like a parley; now it is like a flourish in answer to a challenge'. I went on to explain: 'If in execution of His Majesty's order, I at once communicate this text ... not only to the newspapers but by telegraph to all our embassies it will be known in Paris before midnight ... and will have the effect of a red rag on the French bull. Fight we must if we do not want to act the part of the vanquished without a battle. Success, however, depends essentially upon the impression which the origination of the war makes upon us and others: it is important that we should be the ones attacked'.

Bismarck ensured that the amended text of the Ems telegram was published in newspapers in Berlin. Prussian embassies received copies of the text by telegraph with instructions to communicate the contents to foreign governments. When William saw the published version he is said to have remarked with a shudder, 'This is war'.

The outbreak of war

As Bismarck had anticipated, the publication of the amended Ems telegram caused eruptions in France. French newspapers, convinced that French honour was at stake, demanded war.

Key dates

The Ems telegram:
July 1870

Start of Franco-
Prussian War: July
1870

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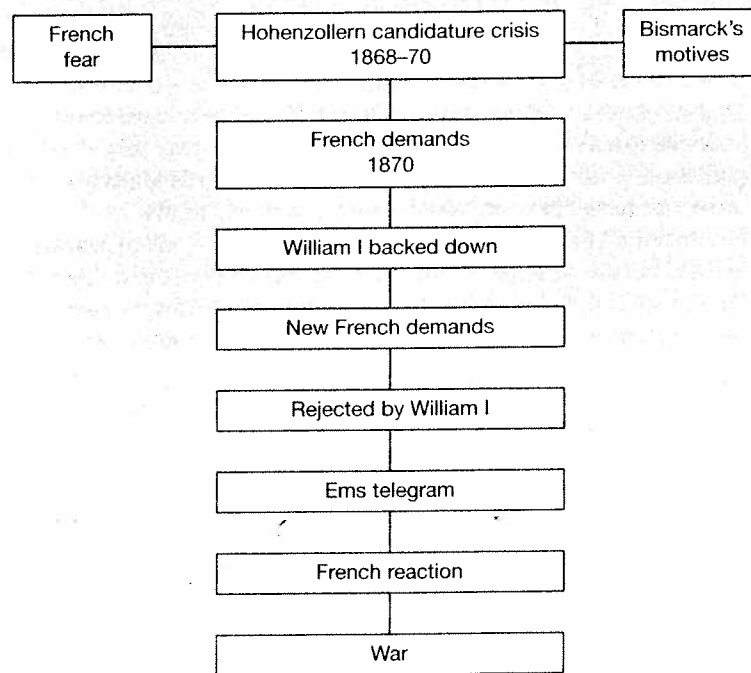
Napoleon, urged on by his wife, his ministers, the Chamber of Deputies and public opinion, declared war on Prussia on 19 July.

It seems likely that Bismarck was prepared to fight a war against France from 1866 onwards, as long as it could appear to be a defensive war, brought about by French aggression. Such a war would almost certainly bring the south German states into the Prussian fold. All that he needed was a suitable opportunity. This occurred with the Hohenzollern candidature crisis, and Bismarck took full advantage of it.

However, there is little evidence that he was set on war from 1866 or even in 1870. He certainly did not control the whole Hohenzollern affair. Nor was it simply opportunism on his part that led to war. Equally important was a series of French diplomatic blunders. Moreover, the French Emperor and people in 1870 were ready to fight before the Ems telegram was published. If Bismarck set a trap for France, it was largely one of France's own making.

Bismarck, claiming that France was the aggressor who had 'committed a grievous sin against humanity', called on the south German states for support in accordance with the terms of their military alliances with Prussia. Convinced that the Fatherland was in danger, they agreed to support Prussia.

Summary diagram: The road to war



Key question

Why was Bismarck in a strong diplomatic position?

3 | The Franco-Prussian War 1870–1

Historians are not in agreement about what to call the war – should it be Franco-Prussian (the usually accepted name) or Franco-German? In different ways it was both. The war was so dominated by Prussian expertise that, in many ways, it was little more than an extended Prussian military enterprise. Bismarck and General Moltke organised the German war effort and Prussian troops outnumbered all other troops in the army. Nevertheless, the war was also the first genuinely German war, in which all the German states fought. At the beginning some support, particularly in the southern German states, was less than enthusiastic. But by the end of the war this had changed. All Germans were proud of, and wished to be associated with, Germany's triumph. Moreover, by 1871 all Germany was united by a blind hatred of France and all things French. This was brought about by government propaganda, and particularly by Bismarck's speeches, letters and newspaper articles.

The diplomatic situation in 1870

- Russia had promised to fight alongside Prussia if Austria joined France: this was enough to keep Austria neutral.
- Denmark toyed with the idea of supporting France in the hope of recovering Schleswig (see page 65), but in the end did nothing.
- Italy made such outrageous demands on France as the price of support, that Napoleon would not accept them.
- Long mistrustful of Napoleon's ambitions, Britain was unwilling to come to France's assistance, particularly after Bismarck made it appear as if the French Emperor was about to invade Belgium in defiance of the longstanding British guarantee of Belgian independence. He did this by publishing in *The Times* draft documents given to him by the French ambassador in 1867, when they were discussing possible 'compensation' for French neutrality during the Seven Weeks' War. Bismarck appears to have kept these documents carefully for use in just such circumstances as arose in July 1870.

Key question

Why did Prussia win?

Early German success

The Prussian army, with troops from the other German states, was quickly mobilised. Mobilisation had been well planned, and nearly 500,000 troops had been moved by train to the borders of Alsace (see Map 4.1 on page 92) by the beginning of August. Six German railway lines ran to the French–German frontier: France had only two. The German soldiers were under the command of the brilliant General Moltke. French mobilisation was slower and not complete by the time Napoleon III arrived at Metz to take supreme command at the end of the month.

The first battles of the war took place at the beginning of August. Moltke's grand strategy was initially bungled by the mistakes of his field commanders. French troops, armed with the **chassepot rifle** and with elementary machine guns (the *mitrailleuses*), fought well in the first battles. However, the

Key term**Chassepot rifle**

A breech-loading rifle, named after the man who invented it.

firepower of the Prussian Krupp artillery proved decisive and the German forces were victorious in the early battles in the French province of Lorraine.

Metz

The early German victories had a catastrophic effect on Napoleon and his chief commander Marshall Bazaine. They went on the defensive, withdrawing 180,000 men into the fortress of Metz. On 14 August, German armies crossed the Moselle river at several points and advanced beyond Metz to cut off the French escape route to Paris. Two days later the French army in Metz attempted to escape northwards but was defeated in a fierce battle and forced to retreat back into the fortress. There it remained besieged until it finally surrendered at the end of October. The decision to remain in Metz was fatal to the French cause for it meant that the bulk of Napoleon's finest troops were out of action.

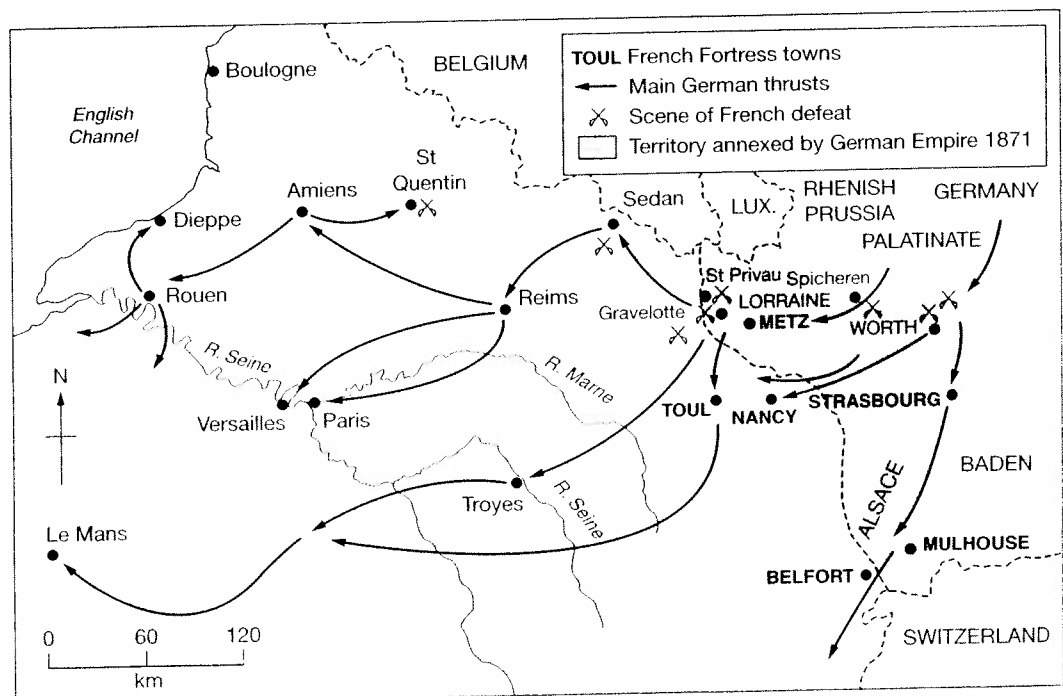
Sedan

Napoleon had left Metz when the fighting began, and reached the Marne river, where a new French army was hurriedly collected under the command of General MacMahon. MacMahon set off with 130,000 men to rescue the army that was supposed to be breaking out of Metz. German troops intercepted MacMahon's forces and drove them back in confusion towards Sedan, near the Belgian border.

On 1 September the most important battle of the war began, watched from a hilltop by William I, Moltke, Bismarck and a selection of German princes. MacMahon refused to consider a

Napoleon III
surrendered at Sedan:
September 1870

Key date



Map 4.1: The Franco-Prussian War.

retreat despite the severe battering his troops were receiving from the 600 German guns surrounding Sedan. 'We must have a victory', he said. It was a forlorn hope. French efforts to break out of Sedan failed. Napoleon rode round during the battle, looking hopefully for a bullet or shell that would spare him the disgrace of surrender. He did not find one.

That night Bismarck, Moltke and MacMahon met to discuss surrender terms. In a letter to his wife Bismarck described what happened next:

Yesterday at five o'clock in the morning, after I had been discussing until one o'clock in the morning with Moltke and the French generals the terms of the capitulation, General Reille woke me to tell me that Napoleon wished to speak with me. I rode without washing and with no breakfast towards Sedan, and found the Emperor in an open carriage, with six officers, on the high road near Sedan. I dismounted, greeted him as politely as if we were in the Palace of the Tuilleries in Paris ... We sent out one of the officers to reconnoitre and he discovered a little villa a kilometre away in Frenois. There I accompanied the Emperor and there we concluded with the French General the capitulation, according to which forty to sixty thousand French – I cannot be more accurate at this time – with all that they had, became our prisoners. The day before yesterday and yesterday [1 and 2 September 1870] cost France one hundred thousand men and an emperor. ... This has been an event of vast historic importance.

The day after the battle, under the terms of surrender, the Germans took prisoner 84,000 men, 2700 officers, 39 generals and one emperor. Later additions brought the total number of prisoners to over 104,000. Napoleon remained a prisoner until 1872 before going into exile in England. When news of the defeat and the Emperor's capture reached Paris on 4 September, Napoleon was deposed by a revolutionary government. The Second Empire was abolished and the Third French Republic was proclaimed in its place.

The end of the war

The war should have finished at this point. There were few French troops available to continue the fighting; most of them either had surrendered at Sedan or were still besieged in Metz (which finally surrendered in October 1870). Little stood in the way of a German advance on Paris. To everyone's surprise the war was to last for another 6 months.

The German forces surrounded Paris by mid-September, and settled down to starve the city into surrender. The government of the new Republic struggled to raise an army in the south of France to relieve the siege of Paris. The result was a large, undisciplined, enthusiastically patriotic mob, which proved no match for the experienced German army.

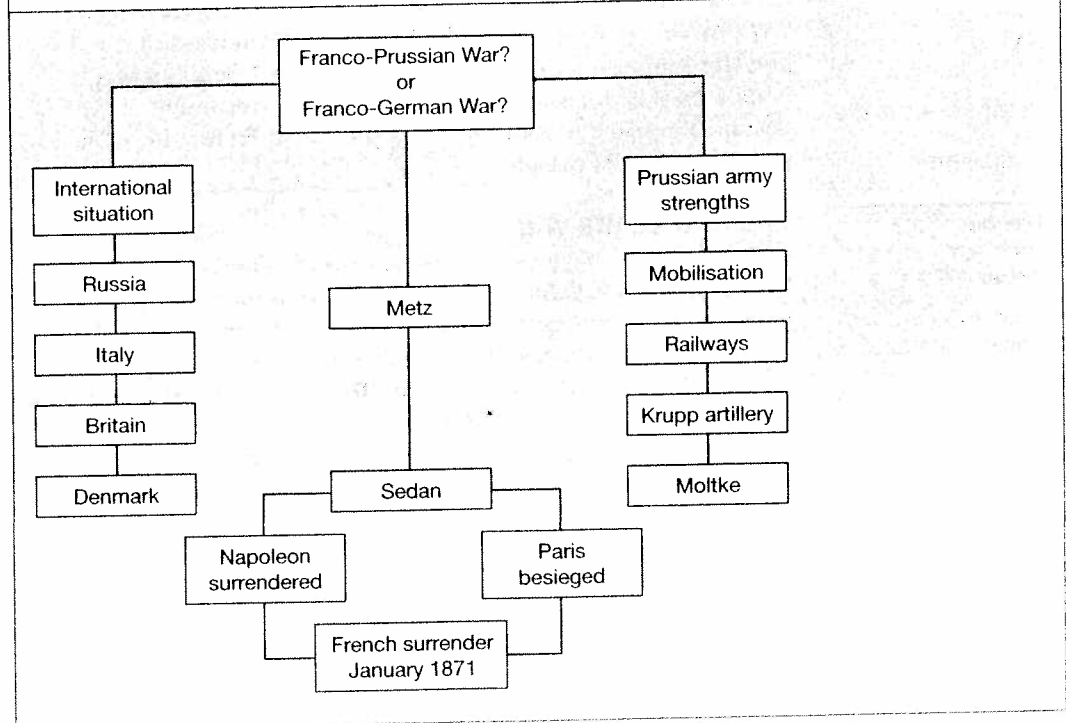
By January 1871 Parisians, desperately short of food, were also subject to bombardment by German guns. On 28 January 1871 the French government finally agreed to accept an armistice.

Key dates
Surrender of the
French army at Metz:
October 1870
France accepted an
armistice: January
1871



Napoleon III (left) and Bismarck (right) on the morning after the battle at Sedan.

Summary diagram: The Franco-Prussian War 1870–1



Key question
What were the main results of the war?

Key date
German Second Empire proclaimed at Versailles: January 1871

4 | The Results of the War

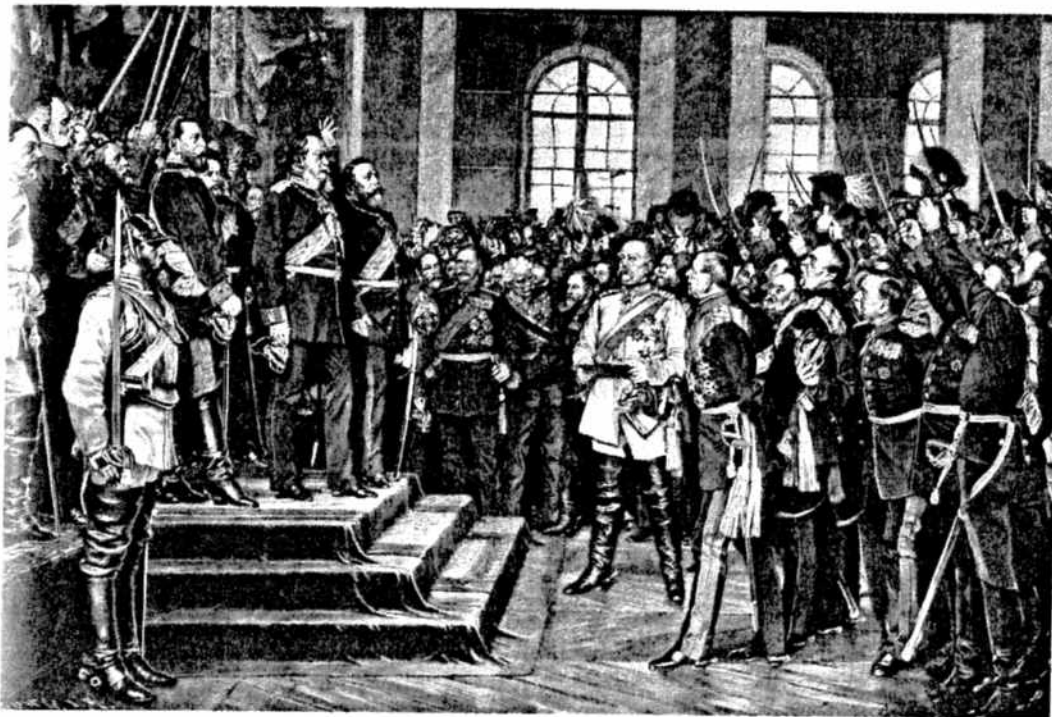
From the start of the war Bismarck was determined that King William I of Prussia should become Emperor of Germany. This was not an easy matter. The four southern German states had to accept him. Moreover, William himself was reluctant to accept a 'German' title, which would take precedence over his Prussian one. He was also determined that the offer of the Imperial crown should come from the Princes, not from the German people, as it had done in 1849 (see page 36).

The south German states

Bismarck was helped by the fact that the successful war against France created a tidal wave of German patriotism. Popular pressure in the four southern states for turning the wartime alliance into a permanent union grew. This strengthened Bismarck's negotiating hand with the south German rulers.

Seeking to preserve Prussian influence at the same time as creating a united Germany, he was determined that the new *Reich* would have a constitution similar to that of the North German Confederation (see page 74). The south German rulers, by contrast, wanted a looser system in which they retained more rights.

Bismarck had to use all his diplomatic skill to get his way. His trump card was the threat to call on the German people to



William proclaimed Emperor in the Hall of Mirrors at Versailles. Anton von Werner's famous painting was completed 14 years after the event in 1885. Note Bismarck's position in the picture (he is dressed in white). What type of people seem to have been present?

remove those rulers who stood in the way of unity. He also made some symbolic concessions, most of which meant little in practice. (Bavaria, for example, was allowed to retain its own peacetime army and a separate postal service.) King Ludwig II of Bavaria, who was particularly reluctant to co-operate, was finally won over by a secret bribe: Bismarck agreed to pay him a large pension to pay off his debts. He used the money confiscated from the King of Hanover (see page 72) in 1866.

In November 1870 separate treaties were signed with each of the four southern states by which they agreed to join the German Empire. The new *Reich* was to be a **federal** state: constituent states retained their monarchies and had extensive power over internal matters. But real power was to rest in the hands of the Emperor, his army officers and his handpicked ministers, of whom Bismarck, the new Imperial Chancellor, would be chief.

Federal

A government in which several states, while independent in domestic affairs, combine for general purposes.

Key term

The German Empire

Ludwig II, King of Bavaria agreed to put his name to a letter asking William to accept the title of Emperor. The other princes were then persuaded to add their names, and the document was sent to William. The appeal was seconded in December 1870, by a deputation to William from the North German *Reichstag*.

On 18 January 1871 King William I of Prussia was proclaimed Kaiser, or German Emperor, not in Berlin, but in the great French palace of Versailles just outside Paris. There was some difficulty about William's precise title. He had set his heart on 'Kaiser of Germany', but as part of a deal made with the King of Bavaria, Bismarck had agreed that the title should be 'German Kaiser'. The situation was saved by the Grand Duke of Baden, who neatly got round the problem by shouting out 'Long live his Imperial and Royal Majesty, Kaiser William'. William, gravely displeased, pointedly ignored Bismarck as the royal party left the platform. Bismarck, given his overall success, could afford to disregard William's displeasure.

The fact that William had been proclaimed German Emperor at Versailles was a bitter pill for the French to swallow, and added to the humiliation of the surrender which came 10 days later.

The Treaty of Frankfurt

The peace treaty between France and Germany was signed at Frankfurt in May 1871:

- German troops were to remain in eastern France until a heavy fine of £200 million had been paid.
- Alsace and the eastern half of Lorraine were annexed to Germany.

These harsh terms caused consternation in France and were to lead to long-lasting enmity between France and Germany. 'What we have gained by arms in half a year, we must protect by arms for half a century', said Moltke. Why did Bismarck impose such a

Key question

Was Bismarck right to impose a harsh treaty on France?

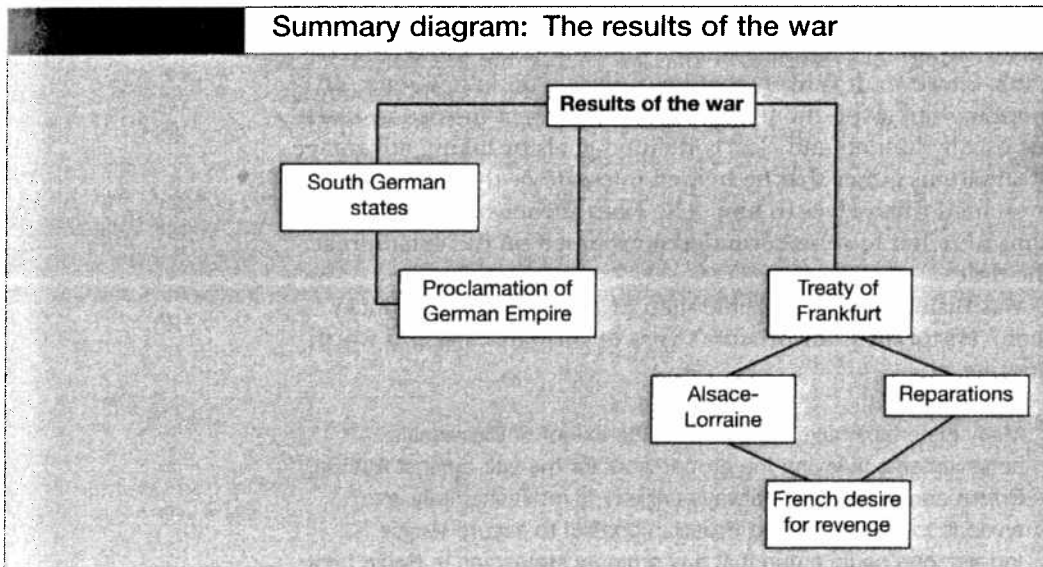
Treaty of Frankfurt:
May 1871

Key date

humiliating treaty on France, so different from the one which ended the war with Austria?

- A good ethnic case could be made for including Alsace in the German *Reich* (Strasbourg had been an imperial city in the days of the Holy Roman Empire). But Lorraine was very French and it might have been better not being annexed.
- Although Alsace and Lorraine were rich in iron ore and good agricultural land, Bismarck's interest in them was not essentially economic.
- There were good strategic reasons for taking both provinces. Bismarck believed that the French defeat, irrespective of the peace terms, turned France into an irreconcilable enemy. He thus wished to ensure that France was so weakened that it could pose no future threat to Germany. The fortresses of Metz and Strasbourg were crucial. Metz, in Moltke's view, was worth the equivalent of an army of 120,000 men.
- During the war, the German press had portrayed France as the guilty party. Justly defeated, most Germans now believed it needed to be punished. One way of doing this was to annex Alsace and Lorraine.

Summary diagram: The results of the war



5 | Key Debate

How skilful was Bismarck?

Bismarck was to be the chief architect of the German Empire. In his memoirs, written in the 1890s, he depicted himself as a statesman who foresaw events and brilliantly achieved his goals. He left readers in no doubt that he was a veritable superman, working from the start of his political career for German unification. Some historians credit him with having a long-term

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strategy to wage war on Austria and France in order to create a united Germany under Prussian control. As evidence, they cite the following words of Bismarck, allegedly spoken to future British Prime Minister Benjamin Disraeli in 1862:

As soon as the army shall have been brought into such a condition to command respect, then I will take the first opportunity to declare war with Austria, to burst asunder the German Confederation, bring the middle and smaller states into subjection and give Germany a national union under the leadership of Prussia.

Other historians, like A.J.P. Taylor, are not convinced. They point out that the above quote was written down many years later by someone who was not present at the meeting. Taylor claimed that Bismarck was merely an opportunist, cleverly exploiting his enemies' mistakes and taking calculated risks which happened to be successful. Bismarck himself said: 'one must always have two irons in the fire'. He often had many more than two. In consequence, it is difficult to disentangle with any certainty his motives or the extent to which he planned ahead. Most historians think it unlikely that an unskilled statesman could have had so much luck. Nor is it likely that a skilled statesman had no plans. The general consensus is that Bismarck, at the very least, had a broad outline of what he wished to achieve in his mind from 1862. However, it is likely that he did not plan in any sense of mapping out a specific set of moves. He sought instead to reach his usually limited and clearly defined goals by taking advantage of situations either that he helped to create or that simply presented themselves to him. The exact means of achieving his aims were left to short-term decisions based on the situation at the time.

Was Bismarck a remarkable man or just a remarkably lucky man? Historian John Breuilly's view of Bismarck's skill is worth quoting:

Many historians have exaggerated the extent of Bismarck's achievements in laying the groundwork for the war against Austria. Britain and Russia were always unlikely to intervene; Italy was anxious to use the Austro-Prussian conflict to secure Venice ... Indeed, one could argue that any ordinary statesman in Berlin bent on war with Austria would not have done significantly worse.

This may be going too far. Historian David Blackbourn has a different view:

There was no Bismarckian 'master-plan', only the firm determination to secure Prussia's position in north Germany and maintain the substance of the military monarchy. At the great-power level, Bismarck pressed for advantage when he saw it, but the chief characteristics of his policy were flexibility and the skilful exploitation of opportunities. He always tried to keep alternative strategies in play – in his own metaphor, to use every square on the

chessboard. Within that broad framework, Bismarck's policy towards Austria, for all its tactical twists and turns, was more single-mindedly bent on a particular outcome than his policy towards France or the southern states.

It is possible to argue that Bismarck did not make Germany: rather Germany made Bismarck. A variety of factors – German nationalism, Prussian economic growth, the international situation, the Prussian army – were such that Bismarck was able to gain the credit for bringing about a unification which may well have developed naturally, whoever had been in power. However, whatever view is taken about the 'inevitability' of German unification, it is clear that it happened as it did and when it did largely as a result of Bismarck's actions. Perhaps his main skill as a diplomat lay in his ability to isolate his enemy.

Some key books in the debate

D. Blackbourn, *The Fontana History of Germany 1780–1918* (Fontana, 1997).

J. Breuilly, *The Formation of the First German Nation-State 1800–1871* (Macmillan, 1996).

W. Carr, *The Origins of the Wars of German Unification* (Longman, 1991).

A.J.P. Taylor, *The Struggle for Mastery in Europe 1848–1918* (Clarendon Press, 1965).
